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The Place of Imitation in Education

Submitted By

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The Place of Imitation in Education.

I. The Nature of Imitation.

1. Imitation is the tendency of the individual to act upon the suggestions of others. When one person performs an action because he has observed the same action in others, he is said to imitate. MacCunn has described imitation as "one of the earliest, deepest, and most tenacious of human instincts." Professor Thorndike writes: "Among the most numerous and the most important causes of the ideas producing action in a human being are the acts of other human beings. Manners, accent, the usages of language, style in dress and appearance, -in a word, the minor phases of human behavior, -are guided almost exclusively by them."

This tendency to imitate is natural and instinctive. The imitation may be unconscious and conscious. When the pupil's life is shaped by the teacher's character, the suggestion is doubtless unconscious, and the imitation may be conscious or unconscious. Professor James says, "All consciousness is motor, and the body registers in some physical movement every idea that flits through consciousness."

2. General Illustrations.

A child observes his father whistling. The child puckers up his lips and tries to do just as his father did. A new girl comes to school. She seems to be a leader and forthwith, as if by contagion, the whole school begin to ape her walk, her speech, her dress, her fashion of dressing the hair, in fact all her actions are imitated as nearly as possible.

Language has an instinctive basis, but its particular form is wholly due to imitation. That we speak and gesture rather than howl, bark or neigh, is a matter of instinct. The English boy drops his "h's" where we should put them on, or tacks them on where we should suppress them, simply because he lives with others who do so. The New Englander says nevah, rivah and Jarvar; The English-man says dŏg, while a western American says dawg. In one region of the United States everyone says bucket; in another, pail. College students in special sections and at different times have their own peculiar epithets and expressions. In one University, to study is to "dig," in another to "bone," in another to "buck," in another to "plug," in anoyher to "plow." To recite poorly in one

place is to "flunk", in another to "fall through"; to fail is to be "plucked". A good recitation sometimes knocks the professors eyes out, at others it corks him, at others merely squelches or strikes him.

Fashions in dress are created and perpetuated through imitation. Were it not so, scores of hideous unbecoming, unhygienic fashions could never have been launched. Desirable fashions are maintained in the same manner. Metropolitan milliners, dress-makers and tailors know that to insure changes of fashion all they need to do is to induce some leader to appear in a new style, and the fashion is launched.

Cases of imitation among animals can also be recalled by all. The canary and the mocking bird learn to sing from hearing others of their species; pointers and setters learn their peculiar feats largely from imitation. Monkeys make themselves appear at once intelligent and ludicrous through their powers of mimicry.

II. The Origin of Imitation.

1. It's Psychological Basis.

"The child is an imitative creature" is a common expression reflecting the fact that even to

the lay mind imitation is an instinct.Psychological-ly,we explain imitation by Baldwin's law,"An idea or a concept always tends to work itself out in action," or to quote James,"All consciousness is motor."When the mind is possessed of an idea we experience an innate,irresistible craving to express it.Feelings of joy and sorrow give evidence of their existing by (working themselves out on the face). Fear causes a change in the heart,lungs and skin.All consciousness tends to take on a physical as well as a mental aspect.Whenever we become conscious of an act or thought of others,we instinctively imitate it in our unconscious endeavor to work this thought out in action.IN addition to this psychological explanation,there is also a purely physiological basis that is worthy of note.Every vital nerve tissue possesses two basic properties,(1),excitability,or irritability (2),contractility.Every nerve cell is both sensory and motor.Hence, when a sense organ is stimulated,nerve tissues are affected,energy is liberated,and motor muscular reaction tends to take place.

Imitation has usually been considered to be a a voluntary act;i.e.,a conscious and purposive

attempt to perform an act observed in another. Preyer, for example, maintains that the child is several months old before it really imitates. Unpurposively, subconsciously, I find myself doing as my associates do. I take on tricks of speech, certain words and phrases; I find myself doing a thousand things my associates do; not because I intended to, but because the acts do themselves.

We may therefore, conceive three important groups of imitation.

a, Ideo-Motor Action.

All organic tissues possess the properties of irritability and contractility. Every nerve cell is both sensory and motor. Consequently, whenever a sense-organ is stimulated, nervous tissues are affec-ted, energy is liberated, and motor muscular reactions tend to take place. This shows the basis of ideo-motor activities. In every-day life there are constant illustrations of this law. One in company with another who speaks or otherwise acts in a striking manner, unintentionally copies the particular action, and is at first probably set going only when in company with the copy. But by and by the process becomes so automatic and habitual that any

stimulus may cause it to function.

(b.) Sensori-Motor Action.

In many cases of imitation, the copy is not consciously apprehended at all. For example, some peculiarity is copied when it has never been consciously perceived in another. It has made its impression and left its mark. Such cases are termed by Baldwin as of the sensori-motor suggestion type, while those cases in which the stimuli is a clearly pictured idea, are termed ideo-motor suggestions.

(c). Auto Imitation.

Many of the involuntary imitations are repetitions of the activities set up by the individual himself, i,e, they are not imitations of some one else. They are auto-imitations. For example, the child strikes a resounding surface with something in his hand. It gives forth a noise which pleases him; he repeats the act, and the series of circular reactions is kept up until fatigue or exhaustion occurs. The fatigue may be in the arm, muscles or ear.

2. The Effects of Imitation on Mental Development. What does imitation do for the child? Among the more prominent mental effects in which imitation is a main factor may be included the power of speech

voluntary movements, self-consciousness, originality, and morality and religion. Imitation begins to work near the beginning of the ninth month, is at the maximum of its influence during the early years, and continues its effect throughout life though diminishing in the amount of its influence as individuality and maturity are reached. When the imitative impulse does come, it comes in earnest. Its importance in the growth of the childs mind is largely in connection with the development of language and of voluntary movement.

Imitation and Originality.

To be original is to be something more than a mere imitator. It is to add something characteristic to ones copy; it is even to be selective of the copy that one will imitate. Through bringing us to consciousness of ourselves, imitation makes our origin-ality possible. There are two other ways that imitation indicates originality. The child does not imitate all the acts of every person that he observes. Many of them slip by him without making sufficient appeal to him to lead to imitation. His rejection is not conscious; it is natural.

But such natural rejections of certain copies declare his individuality and strengthen it.In the second place,those suggestions that do appeal to the child,are transmuted by his own individuality. He copies characteristically.Just as in the old copy-books for teaching penmanship,many pupils may be imitating the same copy,but no two copies of the copy are exactly alike,so every child declares his own originality in the way in which he imitates. Imitation is after all but one side of the mental process.The other side is origination,which is quite as real and demonstrable as imitation itself. Imitation is a mere school-master to bring us to originality.Imitation,then,even when we copy the acts of those near us,is all the while teaching us our own capacity.

III. Characteristics of Imitative Acts of Children.

Children,however,have a strong tendency to observe and perform new acts;hence imitation is an important means of widening their experience and fitting them for various activities and conditions.

1. The Models Children Imitate.

What models do children of younger or older

growth imitate? We cannot say that they imitate the good and not the bad.The interesting deeds,the fascinating,the compelling;even the uninteresting deeds of interesting people;the deeds of a supposed superior;and the deeds of the heroes of all times, -all these catch their attention,appeal to native instincts,solicit action.The children imitate the captivating bad fellow,the play-ground leader, their parents,the teachers they like,and the characters in their favorite stories.The striking personalities about the child,and the heroes of story,biography and history,-these make the virtues imitable to children,these are the examples that influence.

Examples also help to influence their ideals. Examples are said to raise or lower our ideals of living,they fill our minds with a certain pattern of life.They reveal to us our own nature.There is not a school perhaps,in which during the year,some character does not flash forth to shame the face of evil and to make shine the face of goodness.

2. Imitation in Adolescence.

At no period in life is imitation more slavish than during adolescence.College government de-

-pends largely upon the public sentiment espoused by the students themselves.Faculty rules are insig--nificant in comparison with the laws originated by the leaders of the classes.High-school pupils, though not so assertive,idealize even more blindly.

It has been said that, A boy compelled for six hours to see the countenance,and hear the voice of a fretful,unkind,hard or passionate man is placed in a school of vice. A study of what children imitate reveals that they imitate other children, usually those slightly older than themselves,more than they do adults.Let a few children become in--terested in some new game or play and it usually spreads all over a city.From time to time there are epidemics of playing marbles,tops,circus,jack-o-lanterns,foot-ball,base-ball,shinny and etc.

3. Classification of Imitative Acts of Children.

a. Reflex imitation is shown when a child is caused to do something he has a psychological tendency to do by perceiving the act performed by another. Yawning,crying,laughing,and other emotional expres--ions are of this class.

b. Spontaneous Imitation.

Spontaneous imitation is shown when acts not

provided for by other instincts are reproduced without any purpose other than an unconscious one to reproduce and to experience subjectively what has been observed objectively.

c. Dramatic or constructive imitation, is closely allied to the spontaneous, and differs from it chiefly in that the child now finds his own mode of reproducing or representing ideas.

d. Voluntary imitation or imitation for a purpose appears when a child reproduces an act, not for its own sake but to gain some end.

e. Idealistic imitation is that form of imitation in which there is an attempt to act according to a copy or standard conceived as correct and desirable.

4. Development of Imitation.

Reflex imitation is the only form of imitation until the second half of the first year. Later it is obscured, but remains all through life as an important form of suggestion.

Spontaneous imitation usually becomes very prominent the latter part of the first year.

Dramatic imitation usually begins in the third year, and continues all through life, but is at its

climax from about four to seven. During this time the child not only transforms objects, but persons including himself, into whatever his fancy dictates or his dramatic play demands.

Voluntary imitation appears in the second or third year, but does not become prominent for several years. Voluntary imitation is chiefly concerned with the mode of performance.

Idealistic imitation, begins perhaps in the third or fourth year when a child has formed some idea of objects and acts that are pretty or nice. A little girl of four who admired a little girl in a story who always walked and talked quietly and nicely, imitated her and apparently thought of her as an ideal.

5. Tracery Imitations.

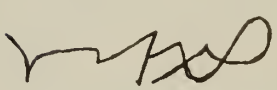
The following are some of the observations made by J.M. Baldwin with respect to his little child during the early period of her life.

In order to test the growth of voluntary control over the muscles of the hand and fingers, he determined to observe the phenomena of the attempt at drawing and writing, for which she showed great fondness as soon as imitation was fixed. Selecting

a few objects well differentiated in outline,- animals which she had already learned to recognize and name after a fashion,-he drew them one by one on paper and let her imitate the copy.There was no semblance of conformity between the child's drawing and the copy.While she could identify the copy and name the animal,she could not identify her own effort,except so far as she remembered what object she set out to make.Figures I,II,III,and IV.,illustrate the straightness and rigidity of her early attempts.

Man:19th month.

Cat:20th month.



Man:20th month.

Figures.I,II.-Early Drawing with copy.

Man 26th month. Bird: 26th month.

Figures III., IV., Early Drawings without copy

With it all there was on her face an expression of dissatisfaction. She would hide her head after making a drawing, extend the pencil to her father, and say, "Papa make man."

Early in the twenty-seventh month a change came. Her father drew a rough human figure, naming the parts in succession as they were made: she suddenly seemed to catch the idea of tracing each part and began for the first time to make figures with vert-cal and horizontal proportion.

On the following page are specimens of her drawing, Figure I, representing a drawing of man with copy and Figure II without copy.

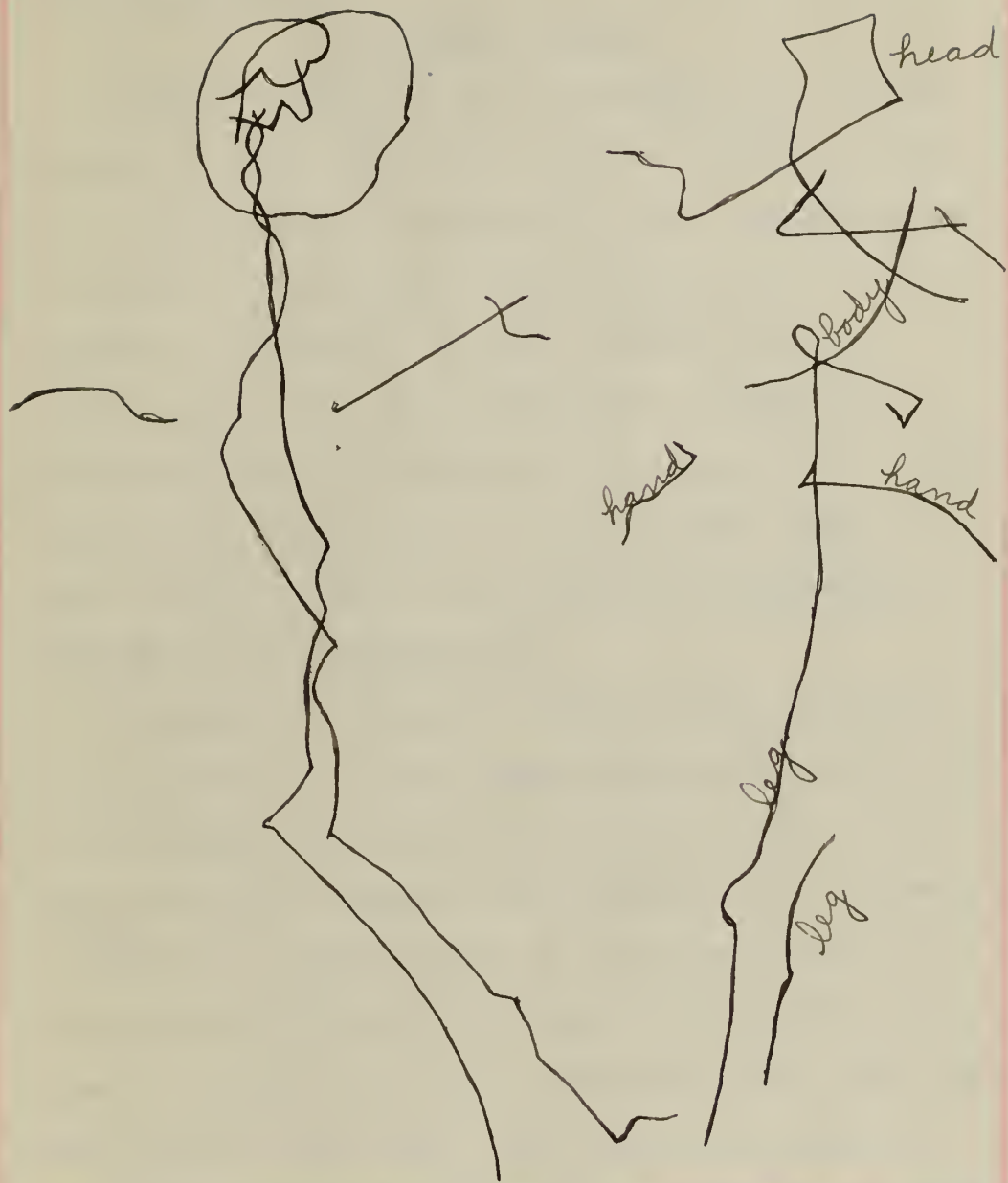


Fig:I,With copy. Fig:II,Without copy.

Fig.-Late Drawings:Man 28th month.

The words written in Fig:II,are from the child's own utterances,taken down at the time,as she drew

the several parts.

6. Personal Models.

Since a person is more revealing and so more imitable in the forming mind than a material model, it is in the realm of personality that imitation has its highest educational value. Emerson wrote to his daughter in college, "It matters little what your studies are, it all lies on who your teacher is." President Jordan is insisting upon constructive individuality in the teacher as the greatest thing in education. The teacher's own success is nine-tenths dependent on his personality.

Children are bound to imitate their teachers. I once heard of a county superintendent visiting one of the country schools on his district. One of the things which he observed and disliked very much was the disorderly way in which the children came into the school-building at the beginning of school. Instead of marching in an orderly way, they rushed in pell-mell and fell into their seats. The Superintendent ordered them all to go back outside again. Then he marched along in front of them as an example and told them to imitate him. Well it happened the Superintendent was quite lame in one of his limbs and as

the children tried to imitate him,they all limped along as he did.He happened to glance back once and observed this and it struck him as being ridiculously funny.This little story proves what great imitators children are.

My professor in Religious Education told of his experience one winter when he was teaching in high school.He had the habit of always carrying his pencil in the same pocket on the same side of his coat.It was not long before he noticed every boy in that high school doing the same thing.He decided to make a change and carry it in the other pocket and it was not long until every boy had changed his and was carrying it in the same pocket as the professor.

IV. The Function of Imitation in Education.

I.As a Socializing Agent.

Imitation is a means of acquiring the races practical experience without the toil and effort of the discoverer.We learn the necessary activities of life,like walking,talking,eating,by imitating our elders.Our social instinct,prompted by the imitative impulse,leads us to appropriate the ways and custom of society just as soon as we are conscious of them Imitation ia a social bond,a means of becoming ini-

-tated into society.

In studying history, literature, education, or any phase of human civilization, we speak of periods and ages, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Elizabethan, and the like. In each we find similar tastes, similar aims and ideals of life, similar aspects of the social problem. Each epoch has its own Zeitgeist, its own spirit of the age. All phases of life show the influence os this social imitation.

The Social Values of Imitation. Social adaptation is largely a matter of imitation. Not only the welfare of the individual, but of others in society depends upon the extent to which he conforms or imitates. The imitative person is the socially desirable person. Thus if one desires social standing he must penetrate into the nature of his companions.

Imitation is also very noticeable in politics. The majority of men votethe party ticket of their fathers. Men often believe themselves original thinkers, but even college [illegible] men vote largely as their fathers did.

Commercial panics are good examples of the force of wholesale imitation. Let it be rumored there is a run on the bank. If a neighbor is known to have

withdrawn deposits a dozen will follow his example, and immediately a stampede results.

The laws of imitation place great responsibili-ty upon every individual in society. Every one, unless isolated even more than Robinson Crusoe, is a part of somebody's environment. Every action has some influence upon others as well as upon ones self. Thus is each one his brothers keeper. Every man is a product of the time in which he lives. A great statesman cannot be produced without a great state.

II. As an Intellectual Agent.

Let us apply the imitative activity to the class room directly. Generally speaking, a child imitates those things that have an interest for him; good or bad, just or unjust, are no factors in his choice. A child will usually copy the vices and pranks of those about him rather than the lessons of industry and sincerity, because the former have a greater interest for him. The teacher's problem, as far as imitation is concerned, is twofold, (1) to offer such models as are worthy of imitation, and (2) to lead the child to center his interests in things better and nobler.

III. As a Character Agent.

Educators urge that imitation influences chara-

-cters because in a peculiar sense it makes for initative and morality.Through bringing us to con--sciousness of ourselves,imitation makes our origin -ality possible.Morality is based upon the recog-nition of the sanctity of the rights of others. The child is born into a society already possessed of these ideals.From his very earliest years he is taught to imitate these.The child's moral conception of right and justice comes from those about him. His parents and teachers are constantly urging that he imitate these,and that he mold his life in harmony with them.The teacher is a very vital moral force in the class-room.

4. Imitation and Morality and Religion.

The last of the effects of imitation on mental development has to do with morality and religion. Morality is the recognition in conduct of the rights of other persons.Religion is the imitation in life of the rights of the Ideal Person.It is to be ob-served,that when copies are bad,imitation works in the interest of morality when the copies are good.As the Apostle Paul long ago wrote to the Corinthians,evil companionships corrupt good manners

The Ideal Person,as conceived definitely by any mind,is the unity of all the perfect characteristics that one knows.This person may have been concreted once in human history,as in Jesus,in which case,the process of imitation and also religious growth,can go on far easier than when the ideal remains impersonal.The Apostle Paul had the imitative of spiritual development when he wrote,"But we allwith unveiled face reflecting as a mirror the glory of the Lord,are transformed into the same image from glory to glory,even as from the Lord the Spirit."

V. The Educational Uses of Imitation.

Material Models.In so far as imitation is one of the agencies of mental development,it is incumbent upon teachers and educational directors everywhere to utilize every means that nature affords in their work to put the best models of every kind before growing children.Among the right material models into contact into which the school should bring the child may be mentioned a beautiful play ground a good serviceable school building,well-lighted corridors,broad stairways,carefully ordered school-rooms,neat and clean texts,an atmosphere of agree-

-able occupation.

VI. The Educational Value of Imitation.

Although mere ability to copy, without discrimination in selecting copy and without judgment in making use of what is copied, is not a high accomplishment, yet the instinct and the capacity to imitate furnish the starting-point for all improvement. Hence it is very essential that a teacher understand the great importance of imitation. Up to the time the child has entered school, a very large proportion of its knowledge has been gained and retained in a purely imitative way. Many of the ancient writers on education realized the importance of imitation in education. Plato shows its value in learning language music, painting, science, dancing, literary style, and also in the formation of character. Xenophen believed that the most effective way of teaching behavior and manners wss through imitation.

Walt Whitman writes:

"There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he looked upon, that object he became,
And that object became part of him for the day, or a certain part of the day,

Or for years or for stretching cycles of years.
The early lilacs became part of this child."

Another poet wrote:

"This price the gods exact for song,
That we become what we sing."

From Walter Pater we have the following words apropos of the subject:

"Imitation:it enters the very fastnesses of character;and we,our souls,ourselves,are forever imitating what we see and hear,the forms,the sounds which haunt our memories,our imagination.We imitate not only if we play a part on the stage,but when we sit as spectators,while our thoughts follow the acting of another.When we read Homer and put ourselves lightly,fluently,into the place of those he describes:we imitate unconsciously the line and color of the walls around us,the trees by the wayside,the animals we pet or make use of,the very dress we wear."

/ Imitation in Language Education.

If one would only stop and think of what it means for one to learn to talk, he would begin to realize the wonderful place imitation claims.A grown person will give a great deal to attain to

speak a foreign foreign language correctly in a few years.The child at five or six has gained almost all of the oral expression of all his thoughts.An averag child of six years, brought up in a good home, possesses a usuable vocabulary of a couple of thousand words.He understands nearly double that many.Imitation not only determines the tongue which the child is to speak, but the vocabulary, the inflection, the rapidity of speech, order of words and the illustrations.

It is easy to recognise the place imitation occupies in the first years of the childish attempts to master the mother tongue.Children learn through imitation to clip their words,to intone them clearly, to talk in monosyllables or, to drawl.A boy when asked why he drawled his words replied,"Mother drawls hern."Chubb says"Children learn their native tongue by imitation; and imitation continues to be, through -out the school course,the chief factor in language work.Of models, the most influential is the teacher herself;the influence of book models is heavily discounted if the teachers own practice is not exemplary and winning."

2. Dramatic Imitation.

One of the important elements of dramatic representation is the imitative. In children the impersonated often becomes so real as to supplant the real for the time being. James writes; "For a few months in one of my children's third year he literally hardly ever appeared in his own person. It was always Play Im so-and-so, and you are So-and So, and the chair is such a thing and then well do this or that."

3. Imitation in Literature.

Although imitations are not so easily traecable in literary productions, yet a critical study of many of the masterpieces discloses much of it. Longfellow's "Hiawatha", has a prototype in the Finnish poem "Kalevala". Although Longfellow cannot be said to have copied from Kalevala, he received very definite suggestions as to both the form and content. Chaucer also was much indebted to Boccaccio for suggestions which he made use of in the "Canterbury Tales". Most Of Shakespeare's works were not absolutely original with him. To assert these facts is in no wise to discredit the authors. To be able to imitate and give in addition the creative touch of a new whole is evidence of genius.

4. Imitation in the Fine Arts.

Even though an artist does not copy other works of art, he must go to nature for much of his material. Goethe writes: "The artist must hold to nature, imitate her. He must choose the best out of the good before him." The fundamental principle in any school of art is imitation. Among the master artists it is selective, intelligent and often unconscious imitation.

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